
First Person Authority and the Problem of Other Minds

Kailashkanta Naik

Abstract: In recent times Donald Davidson has extensively discussed the concept of ‘special authority’ regarding one’s mental states. He takes up different topics of the philosophy of mind and interprets them from a new standpoint. This paper is the outcome how the understanding of first person authority enables us to understand the problem related to other minds. In this regard I have explained how first person authority is guaranteed by explaining how a belief statement expressed by two individual will have the same truth value. If this is proven to be true then the first individual expressing his belief statement will be said to have authority. Though proving the belief statement of the first individual by taking up of the same statement by another individual and proving it to be true is not as simple as that. However, the paper gives a detail account as to how it is possible and then explains the problem related to other minds. The paper sums up by taking up the Principle of Charity where the speaker’s belief is considered to be true and the interpreter believes that the speaker is a rational being who knows what he speaks and if he knows what he speaks, he knows what belief he holds to be true.

Keywords: Davidson, first person authority, other minds, belief, statement.

First Person Authority and the Other Self

Every human being thinks that he has special authority regarding his mental states. He occasionally doubts or questions his concepts and beliefs, but unless he is asked to, he hardly thinks of whether he has misunderstood something. And even if one has a misunderstanding of something one is presumed to have authority over them. But these conceptions of authority don’t hold good when we extend it to other persons. As Davidson observes; “When a speaker avers that he has a belief, hope, desire or intention, there is a presumption that he is not mistaken, a presumption that does not attach to his ascriptions of similar mental states to others. Why should there be this asymmetry between attributions of attitudes to our present selves and attributions of the same attitudes to other selves? What accounts for the authority accorded the first person present tense claims of this sort, and denied second or third person claims?”¹

Two important things are found here. First, whatever an individual asserts he seems to have authority over them which can’t be extended to second or third person. Secondly, most of the assertions that the individual makes about himself are usually not based on evidences while on

others, it is their behavior mostly which becomes the individual’s evidence based on which the other individual seems to have authoritative knowledge. Thus, from the epistemological point of view, the claim that an individual has the special authority of one’s thoughts, beliefs, desires and intentions (which are often not based on evidences) and the claim to know the beliefs, desires, intentions, and thoughts of others invite the problem of other minds. The third person cases are asymmetrical with the first person case because of this difference.

The problem with first person authority is that just because someone expresses something that doesn’t mean that what he attributes is true. It doesn’t entitle us to say that whatever the individual states is true. Even if someone says something sincerely there is no certainty that what he states is true, though we may presume it to be true. There is a possibility of errors as well as doubts about first person mental states. Our mental states are therefore not incorrigible, and sometimes some other’s statement about us may be more authentic and justifiable than our statements about us. The possibility of infallibility of our attitude is questionable. However, even if the knowledge of our mental states can be challenged, the idea of first person authority still holds good.

The problem about first person authority arises because of its non-evidential character. We assume that self-attributer has authority because that is the way we understand ourselves and our minds. In the case of others, we have to depend on their external behaviour. If this happens then, the sceptic is surely justified to raise a question like: “How will our intentional attribution be univocal and unireferential in both first and third person’s case? Or in other words, how can the two ascriptions be meant to the same subject matter?”² In other words how can our knowledge have the same kind of authority both in the first and third person case?

The first step towards the solution of the problem of self-knowledge for Davidson is therefore to give a proper definition of ‘self-attribution.’ Davidson agrees with William Alston on the definition of self-attribution. Alston writes; “Each person is so related to propositions ascribing current mental states to himself that it is logically impossible for him to believe that such a proposition is true without knowing it to be true: while no one else is so related to such propositions.”³

Self-attribution therefore is a belief where you express your current mental states but it becomes logically impossible for the individual to deny the truth of the belief after having expressed it. The second condition that needs to be fulfilled is that, we need to assume that a proposition has to have the same truth value when expressed by two per-

sons. For example, when Jones expresses the proposition like 'I believe Wagner died happy,'⁴ it should have the same truth value as the proposition 'Jones believes Wagner died happy' as expressed by Mr. so and so. Now, by doing this we are trying to prove that if both have the same truth value, then we may say that Jones has the authority over his claim. This supposition will, of course, invite many questions, because what is the guarantee that both of these sentences will have the same truth value? It is thus possible for the two propositions to contradict each other.

If someone were to ask, how are you so sure that you believe that 'Wagner died happy?' then we can answer it in many different ways; like when I respond to others, I may say that I don't know whether he believes 'Wagner died happy.' But if it is for me, then I can't say like this. Secondly, in the case of others, I can say that I don't know whether he believes 'Wagner died happy,' but since he is careless, I think he doesn't believe. But in my case, I can't say that I don't know that I believe 'Wagner died happy'. Similarly, I can also say that I can find out whether he believes, or I think he believes but I am not quite sure, are few examples which are not applicable in my case. In the same way, I can also say that I know that I believe but I am not going to tell you. The above analysis makes explicit the asymmetrical relation between self-knowledge and the knowledge of others. Thus, the self-assumption of mental states is distinct from the assumption of mental states of others.

There are cases where first person claim seems to lose its authority, like in the case of insincerity/pretension or a slip of the tongue. But even if one is insincere or one is mistaken on account of a slip of the tongue, one doesn't lose first person authority because he is aware of it. Even if an individual's belief fails to match his actions or speech one doesn't lose first person authority because his failures are not the result of the mistake of his second order belief rather he may simply be paying only lip service without making any real commitment to it. In the case of self-deceiver, on the other hand, the individual attributes a false belief contrary to his real belief. There is a motive to disregard his own genuine belief which may be because he is not able to face reality or fact. Hence, here too one doesn't lose his first person authority.

But let us think just the opposite, in the sense, that the individual is attributing a genuine self belief which of course is false and of which he is not aware. In this sense can we say that he has made a mistake about his own belief? Now, after examining his genuine belief, the individual comes to the conclusion that it was only a false belief which he was claiming as true belief. Now, can we say that all our beliefs that we claim in our day to day life fall into the category just mentioned? Hence, it is not always the case that all our beliefs which we claim to be true are true. We go wrong in some cases, but that does not prove that all our belief-claims are false. These are two different ways either in first person authority or in case of second and third person authority we may find difficulty when assigning truth values of the sentences like 'I believe Wagner died happy' and 'Jones believes Wagner died happy'.

Hence, if we proceed in this line of argument, we will not make progress in understanding of first person authority. Davidson thus tries to interpret the asymmetry in such a manner so as to avoid skepticism about assignment of truth values to both the propositions. He achieves this by showing how the same property, i.e., observable behavior, can be evidence for both the individuals such that the sentences uttered by each of them will have the same truth value even though this evidence is not used in first person attribution and only used in third person attribution.

Davidson makes a distinction between two related but different asymmetries. This is possible when I attribute something about a person, and you attribute to the same what I have attributed to him. That means, when I say that 'I believe Wagner died happy' you would say that 'you believe that Mr so and so believes that Wagner died happy.' But how can we both have the same content? We may check, verify and then contrast with what I said i.e. 'I believe Wagner died happy' which I have said as something true and your utterance and belief that I have said something true. Davidson says: "These two asymmetries are closely related to one another because your warrant for thinking that I have said something true i.e. I believe Wagner died happy, will be closely related to your warrant of thinking if you were to tell the truth that 'Davidson believes Wagner died happy.'"⁵

Two important things can be drawn from here; the first is that we have to admit that 'I believe Wagner died happy' is true when I am at present stating this and I am aware of the meaning of my statement at present; I know what belief statement I express. And secondly, we also need to believe that the other individual who assures my belief statement that Mr so and so believes that 'Wagner died happy' is a rational being. According to Andrew Woodfield: "Because the external relation is not determined subjectively, the subject is not authoritative about that, a third person might well be in a better position than the subject to know which subject the subject is thinking about, hence be better placed to know which thought it was."⁶ Since both the individuals making a belief statement regarding a third person it is possible that anyone can be wrong about it and the other person's position of knowing the thought that Mr so and so believes that Wagner died happy may be more truthful than the individual himself.

Philosophers who hold the view that part of our mental content is determined by factors that are unknown to the individual have not been able to give a satisfactory response. What they have realized is something that needs to be further reflected. Since, it will be a puzzle about knowing what one believes when part of our mental states is determined by factors outside. And on the other hand, it is possible that internal factors may also play a role in determining one's mental states. We are thus in difficulty if we don't have first person authority to account for internal factors. Two important points can be noted here; if we think that whatever we think are partly determined by factors outside, then we can say that our meanings are not wholly in the head. And secondly, if our meanings are not completely in the head then our minds have no ability to grasp all that is required for the first person authority.

Thus, when I hold a sentence true, we may mean two things, first, through this I express a belief which is true and secondly, the expression of my belief coincides with the content of the meaning of the sentence. So, when I state, 'I believe Wagner died happy' my belief is true and sincere, and the content of my belief is similar to the content of meaning of my sentence. Hence, if you were to know the meaning of my sentence, you would know what belief I express, but not whether it is true or not. Thus, as Jacobsen pointed out: "Presumably Davidson's idea is this: my distinctive way of knowing that I am sincere involves my knowing (in a distinctive way) what mental states I currently have. But since my distinctive way of knowing what mental states I currently have is just what we want to explain, it would be circular to invoke it in the explanation."⁷

We are, therefore, obliged to assume that we both know that when I say 'I believe Wagner died happy,' I am making a true statement of which I am aware of the meaning of that statement. That means I know whether I believe my statement while you may not know this. It is therefore presumed that a speaker doesn't go wrong about his statements; this, of course, can't be same for the interpreter. The reason is obvious because a speaker will not always doubt whether he makes a correct statement and mean what he says. And even if he commits a mistake, he will in no way be able to improve his statement saying; my statement that 'Wagner died happy' will be true only and if only 'Wagner died happy'. The interpreter, on the other hand, will not be able to know whether the speaker is making a correct statement exactly. We, therefore, need to assume that, whenever a speaker makes a statement we need to believe that he is making a true statement even if we are not able to verify his statement.

So, there is no guarantee that an interpreter can interpret a speaker in a right way, for there is always a possibility of misinterpretation. For, the interpreter depends on the utterances of the speaker which is his evidence. So, if a speaker wants to be interpreted, then he has to mean his words in the manner he intends them to mean. But the interpreter also can be ambiguous. If the speaker wants to be interpreted in a particular manner as he intends them to be interpreted, he has to give certain clues to his audience or the interpreter. Davidson thus says that: "Unless there is a presumption that the speaker knows what he means, i.e., is getting his language right 'there would be nothing for the interpreter to interpret. So, there is a presumption that if the speaker knows that he holds a sentence true, he knows what he believes."⁸

In this regard, P.M.S. Hacker says that: "In effect, Davidson's explanation is a transcendental deduction of first person authority. We know that we communicate with one another. It is a requirement of communication that there be a presumption that the speaker knows what he means by his utterances. But if he knows that he holds true the sentence he utters and knows what he means, then he knows what he believes. So, there is a presumption, essential for the possibility of interpretation, and hence of communication, that a speaker knows what he believes when he avers that he believes something."⁹

Thus, Davidson is trying to establish a kind of relationship between whatever an interpreter understands

from the speaker and the speaker's utterances which he claims to have knowledge. He thus asks us to imagine two strangers who are trying to communicate with one another and neither of them is interested in teaching his native language to another. What will finally happen is that the speaker will try to express those words and sentences consistently concerning the particular objects and situations in a conducive environment. In the course of time, one will understand the meaning of a speaker.

The following points emerge from the above discussion. First of all, we need to assume that a speaker is aware of the meaning of those words he uses. Secondly, we need to believe that the speaker is communicating to an interpreter. Third, the interpreter has to assume that speaker is giving some clues to understand the meaning of those words he is using and then, we have to understand that this whole episode is taking place in a commonly shared environment. The interpreter also has to think that the speaker is a rational being having true beliefs about their shared environment. That's why Davidson says that: "It makes no sense in this situation to wonder whether the speaker is generally getting things wrong. His behavior may simply not be interpretable. But if it is, then what his words mean is (generally) what he intends them to mean. Since, the language he is speaking has no other hearers, the idea of the speaker misusing his language has no application. There is a presumption that the speaker usually knows what he means. So, there is a presumption that if he knows that he holds a sentence true, he knows what he believes."¹⁰

In this context Davidson calls this as the 'Principle of Charity.'¹¹ According to this principle, the interpreter will have to think that speaker has true beliefs just like any other rational human being. And so the interpreter, therefore, has to believe that besides the speaker's holding true attitudes he too has many other true beliefs regarding various events and facts in his environment. So, if the speaker in addition to his holding true attitudes also has true assertions about his events and conditions of his environment then from this the interpreter may draw the conclusion that the speaker's holding true attitudes is the result of his holding true beliefs. In this manner, an interpreter will know that the speaker knows the meaning of his words. We can thus draw the following points from the above.

Every speaker is interpretable if and only if he consistently makes use of his words to its related objects and events in a given situation, which would mean he means what his words refer to. So, if he wants to be interpretable, then he means what he says. And secondly, if the speaker is interpretable and he means what he utters then no other further assumptions are to be made, in the sense whether the speaker is getting things wrong.

From the above, it follows that if a speaker is to be interpretable, then he has to use his words such that they refer to the relevant objects correctly and consistently in a given environment, so that he states his true belief. But if one fails to fulfill these conditions in the sense one fails to check its external connections i.e. to its relevant object in a linguistic community then meaningfulness of his words would result in his consistent use of words. Hence, if the speaker is to be interpretable, we have to admit the fact

that the speaker knows the meaning of his words and the interpreter too has to admit that the speaker knows the meaning of his words if at all he wants his project to be successful.

But that is not sufficient as it looks like a speaker is interpretable if only he knew the meaning of his words. However, it doesn't provide any assurance that the speaker knows the meaning of his words nor has any special authority about his words. Of course, Davidson wouldn't agree to this type of analysis as he defends first person authority. And this analysis thus would lead us to (a) every speaker speaks his language only when his language is interpretable. (b) His language is interpretable only when he uses the meaning of his words correctly, and finally (c) therefore one speaks a language only when he uses the meaning of his words correctly. We would then draw two important things from this. Firstly, an individual knows the meaning of his words because he is interpretable, it is not right that he is interpretable because he knows the meaning of his words. And secondly, the individual knows the meaning of his words because he speaks a language.

We find a few lacunas in Davidson's first person authority because a) he restricts his explanations into propositional attitudes; b) he takes consideration into linguistic beings only. In spite of the fact that Davidson offers a critical analysis of firstperson authority still we encounter few setbacks that fail to make his project successful. In this regard, we find that Davidson has either deliberately or non-deliberately failed to take consciousness into consideration. We find that consciousness has an important role in shaping our concepts and belief system which is also the result of the epistemic authority regarding our mental states which we claim to have. Hence, I hope an understanding of consciousness would have given a new shape in Davidson's project regarding first person authority. A successful explanation, therefore, should show that the asymmetry between first and other person ascription entails that the person is a conscious individual. This has been missed by Davidson's explanation and this would have given us a better explanation related to other selves.

Another important thing is that Davidson has only taken into consideration propositional attitudes like belief, intention, desire and so on but has neglected other aspects of pain, sensation, anger and so on, which are also important to have a unified understanding of the mental states which would have helped to have a better understanding related to other minds. Hence, it was essential that for a comprehensive understanding these aspects of mental states also should have been considered.

Conclusion

According to Davidson in the case of the first person authority, the individual's present mental states are to be presumed true as it is to cover all propositional attitudes. There can be no presumption that we can assume about past tense or other attributions of beliefs as true. Therefore first person authority holds which entails an asymmetric relation between first person and second or third person authority. To presume something as true doesn't

mean that it gives us a guarantee of truth. So having special authority about one's mental states does not mean it is infallible, rather sufficiency of explanations should give us confidence that our claim regarding first person authority can't always be wrong. Hence, first person authority has to be presumed as true in spite of not being quite sure. That is the reason that Davidson admitted the fact that first person authority is not often based on evidences. Hence, to explain this, he took the help of speaker and his interpreter. Using this, he tried to show that speakers are not wrong about their mental states. We also found that speakers hold true attitudes without the need of any pieces of evidence. This enables us understand that the speaker is a rational being and his communication towards the interpreter also proves that the speaker believes that he is communicating to a rational being who unlike him also has true beliefs and intentions.

References

- Alston, William. "Verities of Privileged Access," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol-8 No-3, 1971, p. 235.
 Burge, Taylor. "Individualism and Self-Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 85, No. 11, 1988.
 Csorsas, J. Thomas, "Intersubjectivity and Intercorporeality," *Subjectivity*, Vol. 22, 2008.
 Davidson, Donald, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984.
 Davidson, Donald. *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Clarendon Press Oxford, New York, 2002.
 Hacker, P.M.S. "Davidson on First Person Authority," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No-188.1997.
 Jacobsen, Rockney, "Davidson & First-Person Authority: Parataxis & Self-Expression," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol-90, 2009.
 Nguyen. A. Minh, "Davidson on First Person Authority," *Inquiry*, Vol-38, 2004.
 Woodfield, Andrew, *Thought and Object; Essays on Intentionality*, Clarendon Press, New York, 1982.

Notes

- ¹Davidson, Donald. *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Clarendon Press Oxford, New York, 2002, p. 3.
² Nguyen. A. Minh, "Davidson on First Person Authority," *Inquiry*, Vol-38, 2004, p. 458.
³ Alston, William. "Verities of Privileged Access," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol-8 No-3, 1971, p. 235.
⁴ Davidson, Donald. *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Clarendon Press Oxford, New York, 2002, p. 11.
⁵ Ibid
⁶Woodfield, Andrew, *Thought and Object; Essays on Intentionality*, Clarendon Press, New York, 1982, p. viii.
⁷ Jacobsen, Rockney, "Davidson & First-Person Authority: Parataxis & Self-Expression," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol-90, 2009, p. 253.
⁸ Davidson, Donald, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Clarendon Press Oxford, New York, 2002, p. 38.
⁹ Hacker, P.M.S. "Davidson on First Person Authority," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No-188.1997, p. 290.
¹⁰Davidson, Donald. *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*, Clarendon Press Oxford, New York, 2002, p.14.
¹¹Ibid., p. 148.